

Eternal Reward And Punishment

One of the most difficult concepts for our minds to grasp is “eternity,” a never-ending existence. Everything in our physical universe, what we can see and touch, had a beginning and will have an end; therefore, grappling with the concept of eternity can be overwhelming. Since eternity is outside our experience, understanding it is almost impossible for our minds.

We may readily concur with God’s giving us heaven with its wonders, even though we realize that what we did in this short life could not possibly earn us the right to be there throughout eternity. At the same time, we may object to the horrors of hell, thinking that what we did in this short life could not have been bad enough to deserve unending punishment. We may think that the righteous deserve God’s mercy and grace more than the unrighteous deserve His vengeance.

Some make the mistake of thinking that eternal punishment cannot be harmonized with God’s love,

mercy, and grace. Therefore, they seek to interpret the Bible so that it will be consistent with a God who is only loving, kind, and forbearing (1 Timothy 1:2; 1 John 4:8). They overlook the other side of God: He is also a God of wrath and vengeance.¹ He hates lawlessness (Hebrews 1:9), shows “severity” (Romans 11:22), and is a “consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). We read, “Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:22). Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The kindness of God is portrayed in the New Testament in His dealings with Peter (Luke 22:31, 32), Paul (1 Timothy 1:15, 16), and others. His wrath is seen in the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–10) and of Herod (Acts 12:20–23). God struck these people dead for their wrongdoing.

God’s dealings with the disobedient show that He is capable of severe punishment. Those who see God as only a God of love overlook His hot displeasure with sin and His punishment of those who do not submit to His will.

A PREVIEW OF PUNISHMENT

While we wish that the pleasantries in life would never end, we want pain to terminate immediately. What is pleasant and enjoyable is not punishment. Retribution for wrongdoing can be administered only by making us endure those things that are disagree-

¹Read Romans 1:18; 2:8; 3:5; 12:19; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6; 2 Thessalonians 1:8.

able to us. If what God says He will do seems hurtful, such should be expected. How else could God punish sinful man?

What Will Punishment Be Like?

As we have already concluded, the Bible teaches that the punishment of the wicked at the end of time will be forever. We cannot imagine what "eternal punishment" will be like (Matthew 25:46).

Annihilation? Some teach that no one will be punished forever. They believe that "eternal punishment" means that the disobedient will be annihilated. They believe that passing out of existence is everlasting punishment. They base this doctrine on verses which declare that the wicked will be destroyed or will receive eternal destruction (Matthew 10:28).

The Greek word *apollumi*, which is translated "destroy" in Matthew 10:28, is also translated "perishing" (Matthew 8:25) and "lost" (Luke 15:4, 6). The wine skins which Jesus alluded to in Matthew 9:17 would be ruined, but not annihilated; and the sheep, the coin, and the son that were lost (*apollumi*) were found (Luke 15:6, 9, 24). Jesus came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), and He promised that "he who has lost his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39). That which has been annihilated cannot be found or saved. In every conclusive context, the word *apollumi* means "to be lost," "to ruin," "to perish," or "to destroy," but cannot mean "to be annihilated."

The wicked will continue to be punished without end, throughout eternity: "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have

no rest day and night” (Revelation 14:11). The same description is given in Revelation 20:10 concerning the punishment of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet, who were thrown into the lake of fire earlier, in Revelation 19:20. If the lake of fire annihilates those who are thrown into it, the beast and the false prophet who earlier had been thrown into the lake of fire should have burned up by the time the devil was thrown into it more than a thousand years later (Revelation 20:2, 3). They were still in the lake of fire and would continue to be tormented there “day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10).

Those who reject God’s grace under the new covenant will be considered deserving of worse punishment than was administered to those in Israel who violated the law of Moses (Hebrews 10:29). Since death was the worst punishment given to those who violated Moses’ law, there must be a punishment that is to be dreaded even more than death. That punishment is hell.

Actual Punishment? Hell (Gk.: *gehenna*²) is a real place that is mentioned exclusively by Jesus,³ except for one other reference, James 3:6. A clear difference should be noted between Hades, the intermediate place for the dead, and hell, the place where the wicked will be punished.

The word *gehenna* was first applied to a ravine located on the south side of Jerusalem, belonging to

²*Gehenna* is a transliteration into Greek of a Hebrew word that is the combination of two Hebrew words, *ge*, meaning “valley,” and *Hinnom*, the owner of the valley.

³See Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6.

the sons of Hinnom. The place had become abominable and loathsome to God and man, because idolatrous worshipers had burned their children there.⁴ By Jesus' day, it had become a disposal place for Jerusalem's garbage. It stank, was infested with worms, and smoked from continual fires. The word *gehenna* was used by Jesus as a fitting description of the place of punishment for the wicked.

Jesus alluded to the fire of Gehenna as a furnace of fire (Matthew 13:42, 50). This fire is eternal and cannot be quenched (Matthew 3:12; 18:8; 25:41; Mark 9:48⁵). He also said that the "worm" will not die. If the fire and the worms consumed the carcasses, then the fire would cease and the worms would die out for want of anything to consume. Even though Jesus may not have intended for the fire and the worms to be thought of as literal, He did use terms that would indicate the unending nature of the punishment.

If the fire is not literal, why did Jesus repeatedly use the word "fire"? On the other hand, how could He describe to us in an understandable way the punishment of souls except in physical terms? Perhaps in the same way heaven is described in physical terms to convey its beauty. Jesus used physical terms to help us understand the awfulness of hell.

What type of punishment will be experienced in hell? What can the disobedient expect?

(1) Those who are being sent to hell will be told to "depart" (Matthew 7:23; see 25:41; Luke 13:27). They will be separated from God.

⁴See 2 Kings 23:10; see 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31, 32; 19:6.

⁵See Mark 9:43; Luke 3:17.

(2) Those in hell will be punished away from God's presence (2 Thessalonians 1:9). This may indicate that God will not see, hear, or help them.

(3) The devil and his angels, as well as every wicked person who has ever lived, will be in hell (Matthew 25:41).

(4) Hell is a place of torment with fire and brimstone (Revelation 14:10; see 20:10; 21:8).

(5) Those in hell will continue to be destroyed (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

(6) They will not be allowed to enter God's eternal kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 5:21).

(7) They will be suffering the wrath of God (Matthew 3:7; see Romans 2:5; 5:9; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6). It will be poured out without mixture (Revelation 14:10).

(8) They will be in outer, utter darkness (Matthew 8:12; see 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13).

(9) They will receive damnation (Mark 16:16; John 5:29; 2 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Peter 2:3; KJV).

(10) They will be in a state of corruption (Galatians 6:8).

(11) They will suffer God's vengeance (Romans 12:19).

The reaction of those being punished is indescribable: They will be suffering tribulation and distress (Romans 2:9). Jesus said they will be weeping and gnashing their teeth, which is descriptive of intense pain (Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28).

All that is said about hell is dreadfully bad; nothing good is said. Those who go there will have to associate forever with every evil person who has lived, as well as with the devil and his angels (Mat-

thew 25:41)! They will never be with God or with the righteous. They will live in darkness forever. God, who is light, will be absent. The sun, galaxies, stars, and every light of our universe will not exist. Without God and these lights, there is only darkness.

Who Will Go to Hell?

We are told who will be punished. Paul described them as those who are stubborn and have unrepentant hearts, those who are “selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness,” and those who do evil (Romans 2:5, 8, 9). Also, he wrote that they include those “who do not know God and . . . do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Paul gave lists of people who will not go to heaven, which means that they will go to hell (1 Corinthians 6:9; see Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5). Because of the lives they have lived, hell will be their eternal abode.

No wonder the New Testament speaks of fear. Paul wrote, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11). In the same vein, Peter wrote, “If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth” (1 Peter 1:17). Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). Paul also wrote, “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

“Perfect⁶ love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18), and perfect love will keep us obedient (John 14:15, 21; 1 John 5:3). We should develop both a love and a fear of God. Our love for God should draw us near Him to serve Him, and our fear of God should move us to respect Him enough to do His will (1 Peter 1:17).

All that has been stated should be enough to convince us that we do not want to go to hell. Hell was not designed for us, but for the devil and his angels. Because of the trouble he has caused throughout the history of the world, the devil deserves forever and ever the hottest hell God can design. If we say this, however, we should realize that those who do not obey God but follow the devil deserve more than a slight reproof for their sins.

Our greatest goal should be to reach heaven and escape the punishment of hell. The most lowly place in heaven, if heaven has lowly places, is to be preferred throughout eternity over the best place in hell, if hell has a best place. We can avoid the horrors of hell by living as God wants us to live and by helping others to prepare to go to heaven.

A PREVIEW OF HEAVEN

One exciting promise that Jesus made is “Your reward in heaven is great” (Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:23). We who are Christians have hope (Ephesians 4:4) of a life in heaven that far exceeds this one in glory, which is one blessing that makes being Christians worthwhile. No other people have so many songs about heaven or sing so frequently about a future

⁶The Greek word translated “perfect” is *telios*, meaning “mature.”

home. Our expectation of heaven carries us with joy through the many trials and burdens that drive others to sorrow and despair (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (John 10:10). An abundant life is not without problems. Paul wrote, "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). The persecution Paul endured led him to say, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). He wrote about his hardships for Christ, "If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me? If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32; see Isaiah 22:13).

The New Testament gives us much to look forward to. Heaven, in the sense of the eternal home of the saved, is not mentioned in the Scriptures frequently or described in detail, but the blessings of heaven are alluded to many times.

The Christian's hope of a home in heaven is one that brings us joy (Romans 12:12). This is a better promise than was made to those under the old covenant (Hebrews 8:6; 10:34). They were promised the land of Canaan, with long life and prosperity if they kept the covenant God made with them (Deuteronomy 4:13; 5:33). If all we are promised is a place on an earth restored to its pristine state, then God's promises to us under the new covenant, the basis of our hope, are not that much better than the land promises God gave to Israel (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). Our hope, however, is a place forever in heaven (1 Peter 1:3, 4) instead of a plot of land with prosperity and long life on earth.

What Is Heaven Like?

In order to understand heaven as described in the Bible, we must realize that “heaven” is used of three different realms (2 Corinthians 12:2–4): (1) the sky where the clouds are (Deuteronomy 11:11) and where the birds fly (Psalm 79:2), (2) the universe filled with stars and constellations (Genesis 1:14–18; Deuteronomy 1:10), and (3) God’s dwelling place, where the redeemed of the earth will live forever (1 Peter 1:3, 4). This last reference is the concern of this lesson.

The expression “kingdom of heaven” is used to refer to (1) God’s eternal kingdom (Matthew 13:43), (2) the kingdom prepared for the saved (Matthew 25:34), and (3) the kingdom of Christ which He preached was at hand and about which He sent others to preach. This kingdom was referred to as the “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 4:17); the “kingdom of God” (Mark 1:15), “My kingdom” (Luke 22:30), and the “kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13). A unifying thread which runs through these terms correlates them in meaning, for each of them refers to heaven’s reign. Christ’s special reign, which He preached was at hand (Matthew 4:17), began with His ascension (Ephesians 1:19–23) and will end when He returns (1 Corinthians 15:24). This lesson will stress the kingdom the saved will enter as their eternal reward (Matthew 25:34). Only the context can determine which of these uses of the term is meant in each passage.

Since heaven is not a physical dimension, we must realize that the physical terms used to describe it can only hint at the realities of that spiritual realm. Paul wrote concerning this realm, “We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal,

but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). Although God describes heaven in earthly terms, it must not be thought of as physical.

The earth is not to be renovated or changed into a spiritual habitation. If it were, then we could not take seriously Him who sits on the throne, who said, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). Nor could we take literally the statement "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away . . ." (Revelation 21:1).

The new Jerusalem, the city for the saved, is described as being made of the most costly materials known on earth (Revelation 21:11–21). Such a description is awesome, almost beyond human imagination. It is the picture God wanted us mortals to have. We will all be awestricken when we are glorified in His kingdom (1 Thessalonians 2:12; Hebrews 2:10), behold its splendor and glory (Romans 8:18), and become partakers of that glory (1 Peter 5:1). He will be "glorified in His saints" (2 Thessalonians 1:10). We will also be impressed that this is not a passing realm, but will provide for us as citizens of heaven an "eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Compared with the earth, it is "a better possession and a lasting one" (Hebrews 10:34), "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16).

The most wonderful aspect of heaven will be our association throughout eternity with God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit (Revelation 21:3), and all the wonderful saved people who have lived. No fellowship on earth can compare with the eternal fellowship we will have in heaven.

If we could gaze but for a moment on the glory of heaven and see the fellowship we will experience, we would be so excited about going there that we would spend every waking moment dreaming about it, working toward it, and planning for it. Paul wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

What Will Be in Heaven?

Symbols are used to help us understand heaven. Heaven will not have items we need here on earth, like the sun, the moon, or a lamp; nor will there be any night there, for the Lamb (Jesus Christ) will be the light (Revelation 21:23, 25; 22:5). Our having ready access to God will mean that a temple will not be needed, for God and the Lamb will be the temple (Revelation 21:22).

We will not need physical food, for life will be sustained by the water of the river of life and by the fruit of the tree of life (Revelation 22:1, 2). No longer will we be away from God, for “He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them” (Revelation 21:3). The throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and because of this, no curse can be there (Revelation 22:3). Only righteousness will be in our new dwelling place (2 Peter 3:13).

What Will We Be Like?

Our physical bodies will be changed into spiritual bodies (1 Corinthians 15:44, 51–54). Physical bodies would be unsuitable for the spiritual dimension we will enter, for “flesh and blood cannot in-

herit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 15:50). God's spirit realm is natural for Him, since He is a spirit (John 4:24), and for the angels, since they also are spirits (Hebrews 1:14). We cannot understand what the body in that dimension will be like, but we have the assurance "that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). In order for us to see God, we must enter His dimension, for physical beings cannot see God (1 Timothy 6:16). Jesus "will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Philippians 3:20, 21; RSV). When this happens, we "will see His face" (Revelation 22:4), a face that none of us in our physical bodies can behold and live (Exodus 33:20).

When we are changed, we will have the glory of heavenly beings. We will be "glorified with" Christ (Romans 8:17), having entered into glory, honor, and peace (Romans 2:7, 10). In our new state we "will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom" of our Father (Matthew 13:43). "Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly" (1 Corinthians 15:49).

We will be eternal beings with "eternal life," no longer able to die (Luke 20:36; Revelation 21:4). "Eternal life" means quality of life as well as length of life, which can refer to a present possession⁷ or to the life we will receive as a reward for believing in Jesus and serving Him.⁸

⁷See John 3:36; 5:24; 6:47, 54; 1 John 5:11, 13.

⁸Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30; John 10:28; Romans 2:7; 6:22; 1 Timothy 6:12.

What Will We Be Doing?

God has not given us a full description of what we will be doing in heaven, and perhaps for good reason. We might not consider what spiritual beings do to be very exciting, since we are physical. Since our happiness is usually based on physical things, we might have difficulty getting excited about the spiritual activities of heaven.

In heaven we will know only happiness, for God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4). Those physical aspects of this life that have caused us sorrow or have been a curse to us will no longer exist (Revelation 22:3). The saved will enter into the “joy” of our Master (Matthew 25:21, 23). We will get to rest from the toils of this life (Revelation 14:13; Hebrews 4:8–11).

Throughout eternity we will rejoice, because we will be with the Father (Revelation 21:3), with Jesus (John 12:26⁹), with the angels (Luke 9:26), and with those who are saved (Matthew 13:43). We will joyfully serve Jesus (Revelation 22:3) and reign with Him forever (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 22:5). He will be glorified in the saints (2 Thessalonians 1:10), which must mean that Jesus will be highly honored and revered (Philippians 2:10, 11) by those He has saved. Heaven will be a wonderful place of love, fellowship, and rejoicing.

⁹See John 14:3; 17:24; 2 Corinthians 5:6–8; Philippians 1:23; Colossians 3:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

Who Will Go to Heaven?

The glories of heaven are not given on the basis of merit, but on the basis of grace (2 Thessalonians 2:16). We will not be able to brag that we have earned heaven by our good works (Ephesians 2:8, 9; Titus 3:5). We will simply say, “We have done only that which we ought to have done” (Luke 17:10).

Heaven will be given to us as an inheritance.¹⁰ An inheritance is not earned; it is a gift. Those who are heirs are the children of God (Romans 8:16, 17; Galatians 3:6, 7, 29). By being born again of water and Spirit (John 3:5), we are born of God (John 1:12, 13). In this way we become children of God and heirs of heaven through faith and baptism (Galatians 3:26, 27).

Those who will not enter heaven are those who rebel against God and live immoral lives (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; Galatians 5:19–21). Because they have not been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, they will remain defiled and cannot enter heaven (Revelation 21:27; 2 Peter 3:13). Those who will enter heaven are those who have been cleansed by Jesus’ blood (Ephesians 5:25–27; Colossians 1:19–22).

CONCLUSION

The thought that God will punish forever and ever those who have not obeyed Him is horrifying, but the teaching is in His Word. The punishment of the unrighteous will be as eternal as the blessings of the righteous. This certainty should motivate us to seek to please God in everything we do. If we gain

¹⁰See Acts 20:32; see 26:18; Ephesians 1:11, 14, 18; 5:5; Colossians 1:12; 3:24; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 1:4.

eternity with Him in heaven and avoid the everlasting fire with the devil and his angels, every effort, every hardship, every minute of service will be worthwhile.

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 270)

1. Some conclude that eternal punishment cannot be harmonized with God's love, mercy, and grace. Why is this conclusion wrong?
2. Why is the view that the disobedient will be annihilated a false doctrine?
3. What kind of punishment can be expected in hell?
4. How does Paul describe those who will be punished?
5. What should be our greatest goal?
6. How is the Christian's hope of heaven a better promise than was made to those under the old law?
7. In what three ways is "heaven" used?
8. Why will heaven not have the items we need here on earth?
9. Who will go to heaven?

WORD HELPS

divisions of Christendom—denominational differences. In contradiction to the prayer of Jesus (John 17:21) and plain New Testament teaching (1 Corinthians 1:10–13), some men have introduced man-made churches and doctrines that divide believers.